The Devil's Perjure (Part I)
David Dault
Vanderbilt University

Paper presented at Vanderbilt's Graduate Student Research Day, March 24, 2004

> *But in order to get started, let us state a bold proposition:*
> *let us assume that we know what a human being is.*
> \- Johannes Climacus[1]

> *Just let them squabble; men will never mend.*
> *Each one asserts himself as best he can...*
> \- The Homunculus[2]

1. Introductory

What follows here is a series of gestures toward a larger work, so what I offer this afternoon will paint with some broad strokes and is not intended to form a complete whole. It forms one move in a project that I hope will take shape around the subject of *Christology*, particularly the conciliar doctrine of Christ's *full humanity*. The doctrine will be examined by mapping it onto a succession of what I call *limit cases*, of which this afternoon's discussion is but one example. I welcome your feedback and comments.

2. *Faustspiele*

In the second part of Goethe's *Faust*, the character of Mephistopheles—who in the first part made the deal with Faust, the bargain of trading his human soul to Mephisto in return for ultimate knowledge, this devilish character who seems in part one so central to the motion of the play altogether—he recedes into the background. Still present, but the great tempter's bosom companionship to the damned Dr. Faustus is interrupted in several scenes by a series of conjurations which serve to *take Mephisto's place*.

Most interesting for our discussion here today is the conjuration which arises in Faust's laboratory in scene one of act two: a character called *The Homunculus*. The Homunculus is a miniature humanoid in a glass retort, an "alchemical mannikin,"[3] a literal (and literary) test-tube baby, created from an obscene mixture of elements and

---

[1] Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments / Johannes Climacus*, Hong & Hong, eds. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985) 38.
[2] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust, Part Two,* David Luke, trans. (New York: Oxford UP, 1994) 76.

bodily fluids, under the watchful eye and tutelage of the devilish Mephisopheles. The Homunculus accompanies Faust throughout the second act, aiding him on his various quests, as the little creature—though he lacks a proper body—is possessed of great wisdom and classical learning.

Goethe did not invent the notion of such a creature, which comes from classical Hermeticism, from the lore of alchemy. I find it profoundly suggestive that such an entity is incorporated into the narrative of *Faust*. Consider: the Homunculus is an artificial human—incomplete, stunted, not fully corporeal, and only able to survive by remaining in the glass beaker in which he was created. Yet despite such physical deficiencies, the character possesses an extraordinary mental ability. (This tension between the mental and the embodied will hover behind our discussion here.)

To continue: David Luke, in his introduction to his translation of *Faust*, tells us that Goethe envisioned the Homunculus as "uncannily like what we now call the *idiot savant*, the autistic prodigy with a freakish gift of memory and calculation. It may be that Goethe perceived this…", Luke continues, "…as the initial defect of a purely 'spiritual' or cerebral, not yet physical, being."[4]

3. The Homunculus considered

I touch on the Homunculus here not simply to make an obscure literary connection, but to introduce a problem which has its own bright corner in the halls of philosophy and neuroscience.   The Homunculus is a mascot, we might say, for the problem of 'intelligence' and (its relation to) 'the Human'.

Israeli neuroscientist Yadin Dudai, in his book *Memory from A to Z*, has a two-page excursis on homunculi, which he says were

> created in philosophy to account for the operation of the mind. Basically, so goes this version of the homunculus story, there is a little man inside of our head, that sees, hears, smells and tastes, feels, contemplates and plans,

---

[3] David Luke, "Introduction to *Faust, Part II*," *Faust II* (1994) xxix.
[4] Luke, *Faust II* (1994) xxx.

pulls pulleys, presses levers, and makes us think what we think and do what we do.[5]

In a variety of ways, then, the question of the Homunculus is representative of the search for the 'Ghost in the Machine': following Dudai, we can at least say that through the last twenty-five centuries, the Homunculus (as a symbol) has been associated with the matter of human intelligence. In *Faust,* however, Goethe gives us the question of the Homunculus in its broadest form. The creature is not content to remain a "brain in a vat"—a major plot structure of the second act is concerned with the quest of the Homunculus to attain full corporeal existence: in short, what the Homunculus desires most is to become *human*.

4. The Turing Test

And here we come to consider briefly the matter of the Turing Test, first posed by the mathematician Alan M. Turing in his 1950 paper "Computing Machinery and Intelligence."[6] This simple thought experiment has, in the fifty years since its proposal, earned a central place in the field of artificial intelligence theory—as well as garnering its share of criticisms and modifications. For purposes of time, I will describe summarily the essentials of a 'classic' Turing Test, and move quickly to the profound questions it raises for the matter at hand this afternoon.

At its most basic,[7] the Turing Test is a 'game' played by two participants who cannot directly see or interact with one another. In fact, their only interaction is mediated by some form of communication device. Through this device the two participants can carry on a conversation, of sorts—they can ask and respond to questions. Up to this point, the situation is not much different from what occurs every time one of us uses a telephone. The game becomes a 'Turing Test,' however, when there is an *uncertainty* about the correspondent on the other end of the line, a question of identity which must be settled. While Turing offered many permutations to this game, the one that preoccupies

---

[5] Yadin Dudai, *Memory from A to Z: Keywords, Concepts and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002) 121.
[6] A.M. Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence." *Mind*, 59 (1950), 433-460.
[7] I am greatly simplifying the matter as it was originally presented by Turing himself (as his game involved the addition of a 'third player' and the question of gender impersonation), though I am confident that, were there time, the inclusion of these complexities would strengthen, not weaken, my argument here.

us here today is the game which tests the possibility that our correspondent might not be *human*—might, in fact, be an intelligent machine.

Turing hypothesized that, at some point in the future, there might exist a machine which could communicate and respond so well that, in a given period of time, a certain percentage of correspondents would not be able to discern that they were 'talking' with a machine, but would be convinced that they were in fact interacting with a *human* correspondent. When this threshold is reached, Turing posited, there would be no reason not to believe the machine correspondent was, in fact, *intelligent*. I'll say that a different way: for Turing, there is no difference between the *mimicry* of intelligence and intelligence itself. For the purposes of the Test, these are the same. How can this be so?

5. Machine Intelligence

I will draw a stark distinction here between two models of intelligence: The Cartesian *cogito* and the Heideggerian *da-sein*.

Intelligence in the Cartesian model is localized and compartmentalized; it exists *in* the cogito. Intelligence is a possession, like a gold coin that can be clutched (or, remembering the classical notion of the homunculus, intelligence is a little man inside your skull, pulling levers). In the Cartesian model, intelligence is compartmentalized and radically individualized: *I* think, therefore, *I* am. But the Turing Test does not allow us the luxury of seeing the possessions of our correspondent, or knowing anything about how they are 'on the inside.' All we have to go on in the test is the behavior the correspondent presents to us—behavior which gives us enough to go on to decide whether who we're talking with is a human or not.

The cartesian model of intelligence depends upon this premise of possession or interiority. Yet the Turing Test appears to function adequately without accessing this interiority—I contend that this is because the Test implicitly operates on a different model than the cogito, something much more akin to what Heidegger implied with his term *da-sein*.

For a cogito, the cartesian model presupposes that all that is needed to reason is contained in the thinking-being. Heidegger's da-sein, however, presupposes that a thinking-being is always already situated in a world of relationships and constraints and

possibilities. In such a model, it would be difficult to insist that intelligence is an item existing hermetically within an individual. But perhaps instead intelligence is a local *manifestation* of a de-located phenomenon—what I might here call a networked system of differences. A particular intelligence in such a case would not be a premise (as in the cartesian cogito), but an *effect*. In this network a particularized local moment can obtain, and this local moment of effect we have taken the habit of calling the 'individual'. The individual thinking-being 'partakes' of this network of intelligence, therefore, but does not possess it.

If 'intelligence' is such a networked system of difference (after Heidegger) it makes less sense to ask "what is intelligence?" and more sense to ask "what does it mean *to be* intelligent?" To put it another way, we should dispense with the hermetic ontology of intelligence; there is no '*is'* of intelligence, apart from the participation in this networked community that we (when we see its local manifestations) call 'intelligence.'[8] There is only the *be* of intelligence, where 'intelligence' always already proceeds the individual as a community, a community in which a given da-sein (a given thinking-being) is either a member or not a member.

All this discussion so far is constructed around the question of 'human' 'intelligence' – but there is no reason to limit it solely to this population. Thus it follows that the cogito is a horrible model for computer intelligence as well, because it begs the question, by its very nature. It cannot be an adequate measure for the possibility of a thinking machine because it automatically assumes a "self" that *already thinks* (as in "I *think* therefore…"). In the Heideggerian model, this would be a self that has already *differentiated itself* and is already a participant in the networked community of consciousness; a self that already has an implicit *sense of being*.

But (for now) a machine cannot say "I think" as it is pre-cogito (at least on the terms of *our* intelligence). We must take a step back and ask *what does it mean to be a machine, thinking?* Answer that question, and you will have unlocked "artificial"

---

[8] "…a thought comes when "it" wishes, and not when "I" wish, so that it is a falsification of the facts of the case to say that the subject "I" is the condition of the predicate "think." *It* thinks; but that this "it" is precisely the famous old "ego" is, to put it mildly, only a superstition, an assertion, and assuredly not an "immediate certainty." After all, one has even gone too far with this "it thinks"—even the "it" contains an *interpretation* of the process, and odes not belong to the process itself. One infers here according to the

intelligence. Not "what is machine intelligence?" but rather "what is a machine, being intelligent?" Is it like a human, being intelligent?

If the answer is yes, then our model for the manner in which humans are being intelligent becomes vitally important. If the answer is no, our model for humans being intelligent is still important, because knowing how humans are being-intelligent can help us understand the difference between our being-intelligent and a machine's being-intelligent.

Within the parameters of the Turing Test, a machine being-intelligent means that the machine is in some way able to convince its correspondent that it is not a machine at all, but a human being. My hunch, then, is that the Turing Test is not so much a gauge of *intelligence* (at least in the way that we *think* we're meaning that phrase), as it is a test of *belonging*. Because 'intelligence' is not an hermetic commodity to be possessed or lacked in the manner the cartesian cogito model assumes. It is rather composed so much of these *commonalities*—sensate, linguistic—that what we define as intelligence is truly a communal equation. When we say some being is intelligent, it is because that being has been accepted by us into the community of the intelligent. One is not intelligent alone, ever, at all. Intelligence—and its measure—presupposes community. I think want the Turing Test measures is whether or not the 'machine' can adequately participate in the community we call 'intelligence.' This is a very different matter from what we assume the test tells us.

7. Passing

So we must confront this notion of 'passing' – passing the test means the machine passes for human – but also 'passes' in the manner in which we in the South used to speak of a 'passing complexion.' The ability to 'pass' is a matter of suppressing a perception of *difference*. But in so doing this difference is not negated. The difference remains, but it is also *suppressed* to the extent that difference is perceived as an essential component in any *non-belonging*. To pass, therefore, is to pass into a community.

---

grammatical habit: "Thinking is an activity; every activity requires an agent; consequently—"" Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil,* Walter Kaufmann, trans. (New York: Vintage, 1966) 24.

'Passing intelligence' is an intelligence attractive enough to a given community to convince it to suppress its exclusive tendencies and include the da-sein and grant it the label 'intelligent.' We function daily in the myth that intelligence as we commonly know it is an inclusive community. This myth is false. Suppose instead that the 'human intelligence' we are speaking of is an exclusive community. Where is the natural limit between human intelligence and the 'human' itself? In the Turing test, *there is no such natural limit*!

Human intelligence (so the Turing Test shows us) is a community to which one belongs or from which one is excluded. But, as we have just seen, the matter of intelligence is actually *secondary* to the function of the Test itself. The test adjudicates intelligence by first establishing that the correspondent is, in fact, *human*.

I will make the assertion, then, that *Humanity* is a community to which one belongs or from which one is excluded. This is borne out, again, by the Turing Test. It is entirely possible for there to be a correspondent in the game who, for whatever reason (poor communication skills, distraction, impaired mental or physical ability) is judged to be 'non-human,' despite their having the proper biological and chromosonal pedigrees which, in other circumstances, would clearly establish their 'humanity.' But I want to push this further—even in these 'other circumstances,' there is no guarantee that they will always be considered 'human.' 'Passing' is not restricted to the Turing Test—I am suggesting that it is in fact what we are always doing, all the time. In this manner my answer to the question posed a moment ago—namely 'is a machine being-intelligent similar to a human being-intelligent'—would be *yes*, *exactly*. The question of the 'thinking machine' – it is a question of 'passing into' or 'exclusion from' the 'human community,' but this is the same question each of us faces at each moment: are we in, or are we out? My sense is that there is no essence to 'the Human' which can be appealed to settle this question: it is a community action alone.

8. 'Community'

So, though we would very much like this to be the case, the 'Human' is not an *objective* fact; rather 'the Human' is an ever-shifting play of walls—a dangerous community of exclusions. The exclusions (the exclusionary nature), however, are not to be overcome,

as if it could be otherwise. It could not; the walls are essential to the enterprise. 'Being Human' is not natural at all. It is constructed. *This construction is about power.* It is about the power to exclude. 'Humanity' is about difference. Humanity is about the business of excluding the different. Those with the power to exclude inevitably call themselves 'the Human."

There is no 'natural' humanity. There are only groups which include or exclude, and belongingness or not-belongingness to those groups.

6. Humanity and Difference

Human is not an absolute value, not a stark condition to be obtained. The human is in no wise *natural*—it is conditional, provisional, in practicality *contextual*. The 'human' obtains only where there are those overtly *admitted* to the human community. The community is practically open only to those who pass.

To the extent that there we insist there be a positive value to the term 'Human' I will maintain that this value is only that the concept itself is an engine for transgression and eradication of its own positive meaning. 'Humanity' is the (pen?)ultimate *difference engine.*[9]

9. Perjuring

If you make a 'compact with the Devil,' but forge your name or perjure yourself, what are the implications? Can your duplicity in some way save you from the gravity of the Satanic? Is Mephistopheles to be deferred?

At the close of act two in *Faust* our little Homunculus breaks his glass womb and floats into the sea, losing himself so that he might return as a fully incorporated member of humanity. Meanwhile, in any given Turing Test, there is the increasing possibility that the correspondent you take to be human might turn out to be composed of diodes and silicon, not flesh and chromosomes. And even here, among us, the right to be called "human" is, at its core, admission to a community that will give you the privilege of excluding—or including—others. At our best, however, we are only 'passing' for

---

[9] (a term once used for referring to early computers)

human. Like the homunculus or the intelligent machine, we've figured out an angle, at least for now, that gets us past the exclusion.

As I conclude these remarks today, I do so with a gesture toward where I see this project heading. When I write the second part of this paper, I will push in a Christological direction. If my contentions here are plausible—if there is no essence to 'the Human,' if there are only local and momentary 'passings' into communities of exclusion—then I want to consider what this would mean for the conciliar doctrine of Christ's *full humanity*. This is the question that lies at the end of the road ahead of us.

10. Detouring

But, for now, we are detouring. Or, perhaps it would be more proper to say we are *De-Turing,* on this road.   A diversion of our forward progress. Another roadside attraction, here on our flight out of Egypt. Just like in the days of old, the Sphinx asks a riddle, barring our way. Four legs in the morning, three legs at night, two legs in the middle. The Answer is 'the Human.' To pass, one must unlock the riddle of the Human.